

Full Employment for the Future

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“School is not preparation for life—it is life, and it ought to be democracy.” – Bayard Rustin^[1]

Sora Han asks us to consider the role of lawsuits brought by imprisoned people that “lacked legal merit” and enabled the Prison Litigation Reform Act because they “failed to state a claim upon which relief can be granted.” Adjudications of those deserving of relief and their merit haunt the U.S. political life marked by histories of racist patriarchy. ^[2] Such questions rely on ideological norms of calculation and assessment. *Who deserves what types of entitlements? On what grounds?* In this moment of rampant and structural joblessness, there is an increasing critique of universities for their failure to create appropriate routes to employment for their graduates who are borrowing increasing sums of money to attend. Do these good students, who make, what President Obama has dubbed “good choices.” (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/08/23/transcript-obamas-remarks-on-college-affordability-plan>) deserve jobs? ^[3] If so, why only them? Or, with the extreme wealth of the U.S., should these good students, along with the bad, and everyone else, be entitled to a job or income? And what do employment rates for undergraduates have to do with the university anyway?

Writing in a German daily newspaper in 1848, Marx confronted such questions by arguing that ruling regimes consistently attempt to mystify their modes of dominance in the “unpretentious term: *production costs*.” Such costs, he argued, “are defrayed for the state by taxes and the taxes are raised by the *work of the nation*. Thus in an *economic* sense it remains an enigma how any king can give anything to a nation... In all cases, the king can only give what is given to him. That is the position in an *economic sense*. It so happens, however, that *constitutional* kings arise exactly at those moments when people find the clue to this *economic secret*.” ^[4] Part of building the undercommons of the university is first to acknowledge this “economic secret”: we, workers, make the university, on both sides of finance and production. Universities—public, private, and even for-profit ones like the University of Phoenix—are reliant on the work of government and thus the social wealth we produce. ^[5] And secondly, an abundant challenge before us is to proliferate freedom practices within our workplaces and beyond. The university is one site for these actions, but, as Fred

Moten and Stefano Harney have recently suggested, it doesn't have any necessary relationship to the university. Rather the university happens to be their work place, and the location where they practice the urgent task of commoning. ^[6] Commoning, in this sense, is the practice against enclosure: the insistent struggle for means of subsistence and survival, plentitude and freedom. ^[7] For example, when formerly enslaved laundry workers in Atlanta clipped books onto their clotheslines to teach each other to read, while they "stole" time from their employer, they engaged in such practices. ^[8] Commoning is the act of making the commons and the relations that undergird the places called "the commons." Attention to how commoning practices were criminalized is what first directed Marx's attention to the study of economics. ^[9] Likewise, practices of commoning also hold answers for anti-criminalization struggles.

Though reliant on the economic secret of taxation, many have recently argued against universities as commons, and instead maintained that colleges and universities are merely useful or "productive" ^[10] for what they provide capital, whether as a coercive apparatus of a "mental discipline factory," ^[11] or a place for capital to externalize the costs of training workers in the skills needed for jobs in the market. ^[12] But if one believes either of these types of utilitarian arguments for education—the latter more bourgeois than the former—then the cause of the crisis of daily subsistence and unemployment (which is a relatively recent phenomena for unemployed and under-employed college graduates whose skills and geography will not translate into jobs) then it is the universities that are seen as having failed to do their proper training; ^[13] or worse, it is the students failing to appropriately assess which professions were in need of workers and choose an agenda of study accordingly; or the problem is the students own lack of bravery to take sufficient risk, as Bain Capital's former managing director Edward Conard argued. ^[14] Or perhaps, as President Obama has suggested, students lack the adequate metrics to evaluate "how well do...graduates [of a particular university] do in the workforce."

(<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/08/23/transcript-obamas-remarks-on-college-affordability-plan/>) ^[15]

Such sentiments (<http://jacobinmag.com/2013/08/whats-the-matter-with-indiana/>)—that suggest the universities 'lack the merit' (in terms of job training and necessary science, technology, engineering, math [STEM] emphasis) that would entitle them to adequate public funding—utilize inappropriate analyses, and instead a macroeconomic perspective is necessary to understand the role of unemployment in the contemporary political economy. ^[16] Capital will not provide the necessary jobs for the current number of people, college graduates or not, unless it sees appropriate rates of profit in such an expenditure. As David Broderick, C.E.O. of U.S. Steel put it "U.S. Steel is in business to make profits, not to make steel." ^[17] Or as the founder of the Apollo Group, the parent company of the University of Phoenix put it: "This is a corporation...Coming here is not a rite of passage. We're not trying to develop [students] or go in for that 'expand their minds' bullshit." ^[18] From the perspective

of capital, use value means little; exchange value dominates; and high rates of unemployment are essential to maintaining working-class discipline and depressed wages. ^[19] And as a result, for over fifty-five years, the Federal Reserve has worked arduously in order to ensure that the rate of inflation remains low, with the most marginalized workers bearing the weight of such policy choices that emphasize containing inflation over guaranteed jobs. ^[20] Viewed from the perspective of the postwar Federal Reserve, few jobs are more important than the one played by unemployed people—helping to contain the inflation rate. ^[21] These problems are not technical ones that can be solved with better evaluative metrics for universities; rather, they are *political* problems.

For colleges and universities to play their part in creating good jobs, one crucial thing should be the teaching of courses in the history of domestic workers. President Obama says he plans to “encourage more colleges to embrace innovative new ways to prepare our students for a 21st century economy.” (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/08/23/transcript-obamas-remarks-on-college-affordability-plan/>) ^[22] Since the Bureau of Labor Statistics has predicted that the “health and social assistance sector” will be responsible for the bulk of the job growth through 2020, it seems important that these jobs should provide living wages and adequate benefits that all workers deserve. ^[23] But domestic workers still struggle with gaining legal rights to organize unions to fight for such benefits. (<http://www.domesticworkersunited.org/index.php/en/pressroom/dwu-in-the-news/item/112-domestic-workers-bill-killed-in-california-by-jerry-brown-veto>) ^[24] Like the problems of unemployment generally, this situation is not a result of personal failings of these workers or their supposed lack of “skills”; rather, the history of domestic workers show that their exclusion from the Fair Labor Standards Act had everything to do with racist and patriarchal Jim Crow political power in Congress. In 1938, the authoritarian experience of Jim Crow life ensured that only 4% of Black people could vote for the politicians who shaped the FLSA. ^[25] This Jim Crow exclusion lives on with the continued marginalization of care workers from legal protections. ^[26] And since such issues arose in the political sphere, they should be resolved in it. So, for colleges and universities to do their part in creating “good jobs” in the most rapidly growing area of the economy, they should teach this history and actively mobilize their constituencies on behalf of organizations like Domestic Workers United (<http://www.domesticworkersunited.org/index.php/en/>).

From this analysis, we can see that the problem of wagelessness is centrally a political one, and that people who are without wages are central to the macroeconomic relations. As Marx suggested, “wages are...regulated by the expansion and contraction of the industrial reserve army.” ^[27] But how was this group of wageless people created? And how could it have been otherwise? In the post-World War II era, the increasing automation of production, enabled by investments in constant capital and machinery (along with relatively inexpensive energy), pushed many people out of jobs and created conditions of labor surpluses—what Marx called the production of the “relative surplus population” or “the industrial reserve army.” ^[28]

While in recent history, college graduates have not been the ones who are redundant to capital as waged laborers, the great recession of the neoliberal era has changed this; people with a BA recently had unemployment and underemployment rates in the range of 4% and 8% respectively. ^[29] The leading scholars of the rise of the prison industrial complex in the post-1960s moment such as Tony Platt and Ruth Wilson Gilmore suggest that the formal and informal control of this group of people is a chief responsibility of the police-prison relation. ^[30] Perhaps then negating the production this surplus population can be an important grounding upon which abolitionist-reforms can be achieved.

This assessment of how wagenessness is produced and its centrality to political economy shows that the rhetoric deployed to legitimize budget cuts to universities and humanities education is disingenuous and diversionary. The production of surplus populations is crucial to the maintenance of a “healthy” economy with low rates of inflation and high rates of GDP. So, the critique of humanities education for inadequacies of job preparation misses the mark. Rather, historical analysis of the production of wagelessness, and those who attempted to alleviate such plagues, are better situated to understand how to address such crucial problems today. From this standpoint, we can make a powerful and uncompromising defense of Moten and Harney’s invocations to *study*. And in this sense, such studying is one difficult step from becoming an economic rejuvenation plan that could enable meaningful social reforms on a host of scales: *wages for students*.

Starting at least with Reconstruction, the fight for a governmental guarantee to a job or income has a long legacy in Black freedom struggles. ^[31] Few pursued such efforts with the fervor of Bayard Rustin, the great civil rights and socialist organizer most well known for his role coordinating the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The March, which grew out of the organizing of the Negro American Labor Council, pushed for the full employment as its central demand. After the failure to achieve this as a victory for the March, Rustin continued to pursue such goals. But he also knew that since increased productive capacity was the problem creating conditions of wagelessness, the solution required a new way of envisioning waged work. In 1964 he explained that:

“we have to redefine what work is now... we must recognize that the work of the young people is to develop their minds and skills for the benefit of society. There is no more sacred work. Therefore, I think that high school and college students who could not afford it should have not only their books paid for and their tuition paid—if necessary, get a salary in order to make it possible for them to consider their work school...as the machines take over various areas [of work and] the private sector of the economy is not capable of keeping people at work with dignity, then the public sector must come in and play a larger role.”

(<http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/interview/bayard-rustin>) ^[32]

Such an analysis was prescient fifty years ago and remains so today. Indeed, it holds solutions to a number of critical problems confronting U.S. society.

Rustin wasn't the only person to focus on this as a solution to problems of unemployment. In 1975, a group of New England students published a pamphlet called, "Wages for Students" which utilized a feminist Marxist analysis to argue for the importance of the work of those without wages for capital. (<http://zerowork.org/WagesForStudents.html>) This group criticized the notion that school is a "good investment" and that students should view themselves as a "little corporation." "Going to school, being a student is work," they explained. "This work is called schoolwork although it is not usually considered to really be work since we don't receive any wages for doing it. This does not mean that schoolwork is not work, but rather that they have taught us to believe that only if you are paid do you really work." ^[33] Their analysis, formed through the crucible of the oil shocks and the destruction of the New Deal order, suggests a need for a return to full employment planning as a route to decouple jobs and education.

While the demand for a governmental guarantee to a job or income has been supported recently by everyone from the short-lived Occupy Wall Street Demands Working Group (<http://lbo-news.com/2011/10/20/ows-demands-working-group-jobs-for-all/>) to Bruce Springsteen (<http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/bruce-springsteens-state-of-the-union-20120329>), and persistently in the pages of Jacobin Magazine (<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/02/work-it/>), it will certainly take many strong movements on multiple fronts for it to become the dominant moral value that it was from the 1940s-70s. ^[34] Some might suggest that this demand is a further integration into the capitalist wage relation; but as the theorists of wageless expropriation of value show, the unwaged work in homes and elsewhere is already integrated in to capitalist social relations. ^[35] From this vantage point, to demand a wage for such work is to compel capital to internalize costs it has historically externalized.

But the demand for full employment should not be imposed on our present in an undialectical way. The extent to which full employment planning is the poetry of the past or the future is *determined* by how seriously one understands the problems of unwaged caring labor and environmental justice struggles (since behind every automated production line is the energy—and often fossil fuels—that power it). ^[36] Full employment for the future is not about achieving higher rates of GDP or producing more widgets than any dumpster can hold. Rather, full employment for the future would plan for lower retirement ages, shorter work weeks, and socially useful and urgent labor such as elder care, childcare, teaching, education, conservation. It would confront centrally, the problem Harvey Swados identified in 1957, "the problem of work." ^[37]

Indeed such ideas are historical as well and won't need to be invented without previous precedent. There were a number of thinkers and activists within full employment movements who explored such concepts. Economists Leon and Mary Dublin Keyserling called for public jobs for conservation and creating new modes of electricity in the 1940s. ^[38] A. Philip Randolph argued in front of the Los Angeles Central Labor Council in 1958 that as a response to automation, organized labor must "move vigorously for the establishment of the 4 hour day and 5 day week, social security coverage of domestic and agricultural workers and a minimum wage consistent with decency, comfort and health, education and recreation for all American families." ^[39] In the early 1960s people in eastern Kentucky formed the Appalachian Committee for Full Employment (http://nuncenter.org/OHMS-Viewer/viewer.php?cachefile=19910H025_App297_Maggard_not_indexed.xml) as a response to widespread poverty and unemployment created by the recent downturn in the coal industry, combined with increased mechanization of mining. They struggled intensely against mine operators, politicians, the police, and the leadership of the United Mine Workers while pursuing governmental guarantees to a job or income. ^[40] Their plan for full employment included the creation of medical clinics, a special education center for children who needed supplemental attention and for adult education, day care centers, and rebuilding homes with adequate plumbing and sewers. ^[41] In the 1970s and 80s, Coretta Scott King led the Full Employment Action Council (FEAC) as they pushed for things like solar paneling and weatherizing buildings to be part of a full employment strategy. ^[42] FEAC worked with local groups like the Massachusetts Coalition for Full Employment to organize a solar-heating and weatherizing "work-in" with building trades officials to show what types work needed doing, and they began plans to coordinate with the Clamshell Alliance and Science for the People to show how full employment could be utilized for new energy sources. ^[43] As King presciently argued, "full employment requires a major improvement in our educational system...it requires...major investment[s] in mass transit, [and] in energy." ^[44]

Struggles for full employment are by no means revolutionary per se, nor should they be confused as such, but they are indissolubly tied to social reform and revolution in the way Rosa Luxemburg explored. ^[45] Full employment serves to negate certain violences of proletarianization, and in that sense it enables greater proliferation of revolutionary strategy, but not in and of itself. Rather out of a new dialectical synthesis people emerge in a greater position of power; they become less desperate, less tied to a particular wage, less under the thumb of their sexist shift manager, and so forth. Then the question becomes, what new contradictions must be struggled over.

And what of government? How does such thinking compel us to consider what role governmental activity plays in the struggle to enlarge one governmental sector—public education—and eradicate another—the prison industrial complex? This is the tension of struggle around "the state." As Moten and Harney suggest, "not only is [the state] not a monolith but it's very, very thoroughly aerated. There are all kinds of little holes and tunnels and ditches and

highways and byways through the state that are being produced and maintained constantly by the people who are also at the same time doing this labor that ends in the production of the state. So, what is it that these folks are producing?" ^[46] And what happens when the public education and the relations of imprisonment are not isolated or directly opposed? What occurs when they bump up against each other? These are urgent questions that must be negotiated in actual political and social struggles with commoning practices helping to guide the way.

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[David Stein](http://dornsife.usc.edu/cf/ase/student_display.cfm?Person_ID=1015681) (http://dornsife.usc.edu/cf/ase/student_display.cfm?Person_ID=1015681) is completing his PhD in American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California where he studies working-class history, African-American studies, policing and imprisonment, and the history of capitalism. His dissertation, "*Fearing Inflation, Inflating Fears: The End of Full Employment and the Rise of the Carceral State*," focuses on Black freedom movements that sought to eradicate structural unemployment and examines contests over governmental responses to people who were disemployed due to automation and globalization from the 1930s-1980s. He wishes to acknowledge Shana Agid, Jon Free, Craig Gilmore, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Sarah Haley, Sora Han, Gillian Harkins, Erica Meiners, Jake Peters, and Rebecca Popuch for their generative influence on this essay.